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Benjamin Rush: Medical Ethics for a New Republic

Character and Connections

Early Life and Education

There are several interesting parallels in the early lives of the American physician and moralist, Benjamin Rush, and his British counterparts John Gregory and Thomas Percival. Most significantly, the early deaths of their fathers led to a series of paternal substitutes chosen for them by their mothers or, in Percival's case, his sister. For Rush, as for Gregory and Percival, these early mentors played an important role in his religious, intellectual and social development. They directed, with the co-operation of his mother, the type of education and schooling he received, the milieu he was raised in and, to some extent, the career he eventually pursued.[1]

John Rush, his father, was a farmer and gunsmith who died in Byberry township, Pennsylvania, when Rush was five years old. After his father's death his mother shifted her family from the Episcopal to the Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, led by Rev. Gilbert Tennent. The first of Rush's mentors, Tennent was a leader in the evangelical movement known as the 'Great Awakening' which split the American Presbyterian Church into two opposing factions, the 'New Sides' and 'Old Sides'.[2] Much more than Percival's, Rush's early life was marked by a climate of intense religiosity, the more fervent for its militant evangelical nature. In direct contrast to the urbane character of John Seddon, Percival's first teacher, Tennent was 'a fiery and uncompromising spirit'. 'Wherever he went', Rush noted approvingly, 'the Kingdom of Satan trembled.'[3] Despite their different religious temperaments, both teachers believed that the primary purpose of education was to form young men who were good as well as useful.

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Like Gregory and Percival, Rush was educated to be a member of the liberal professions, a social leader and an enlightened Christian reformer.

At the age of eight, Rush was sent from his home in Philadelphia to board at a Presbyterian academy in West Nottingham, Maryland, where he came under the tutelage of his maternal uncle, Samuel Finley, another 'New Side' evangelist.[4]

Rush received the traditional classical education at Nottingham as well as the evangelical one suggested above. He related in his memoirs that he disliked the study of Latin and Greek and that he enjoyed and profited from all aspects of his English language training. His science instruction had been, he said, as 'primitive' and 'cursory' as it was in all the colonial academies. The curriculum also included lessons in polite deportment, the 'forms of good breeding' and 'practical agriculture'. According to Rush, the students were taught, as a component of good breeding, the art of letter writing and 'the asking and receiving of favours'. Practical agriculture, which, in retrospect at least, he praised highly, consisted in sharing 'in the labours of harvest and hay making', an exercise which 'begot health and helped to implant more deeply in our minds the native passion for rural life'.[5] In his later role as one of America's most influential educators, Rush vigorously promoted the benefits of a rural education for its salutary effect on students' health and morals, and he was one of the first to advocate formal agricultural instruction in the colleges of America.[6]

From Nottingham and the influence of Samuel Finley, Rush, at the age of fifteen, moved to the College of New Jersey (later Princeton), by then under the presidency of Rev. Samuel Davies. A self-made man, Davies was known throughout the colonies for his splendid oratory and elegant manners.[7] Like Rush's earlier mentors, he too was a 'New Side' preacher who impressed upon his students their duty as 'Agents of God' to dedicate their lives to the social and moral improvement of their society.[8] For him, regeneration and reform were the chief principles of action and America the stage on which true religion would eventually emerge. Davies' call for conversion and regeneration, like most of the implications of this 'born again' philosophy was not inimical to the programmes for reform advocated by less religiously zealous Enlightenment thinkers. Like Percival and other graduates of the Dissenting academies and Scottish universities, Davies' students saw themselves as civic reformers as well as religious ones.

In his recent study of Princeton University, Mark Noll

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comments on the dedication and skill with which the two successive presidents, Davies and Finley, taught the non-religious subjects. Both these men, he noted, 'championed free-inquiry, on the model of Bacon's induction, and did what they could to promote mathematics and natural philosophy'. As Noll emphasizes, they managed at the same time to maintain orthodox Christian assumptions about 'the unity of truth under God'.[9] For them, natural philosophy demonstrated to its students God's wonders, and moral philosophy the inherent reasonableness of Christianity.

Davies, according to Rush, taught him the value of keeping a literary journal or commonplace book in which he was instructed to record interesting passages from his reading of the classics. This was a task which Rush adopted with characteristic enthusiasm and performed faithfully for the rest of his life. His recordings, however, were not restricted to literary remarks but included the momentous occasions of his life both private and public, as well as the minutiae – bits of conversation, dreams and observations on every day life. Rush also kept commonplace books on medical topics, in which, as he wrote to Thomas Jefferson, 'I have recorded the results of the observations of my patients and friends upon the causes, symptoms, and cure of diseases'.[10]

In 1760, less than two years after he entered New Jersey, Rush graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree.[11] He had considered a career in the church, but he believed that he had failed to receive the necessary 'call' or infusion of grace and decided instead to pursue a career in the law. His mentor, Samuel Finley, was unhappy with his choice and warned him that such a life was likely to be one fraught with temptations which could imperil his immortal soul.[12] Rush subsequently chose a career in medicine and in 1761 began his apprenticeship with Philadelphia's leading physician, Dr John Redman, a graduate of Edinburgh and Leyden. At the same time that he learned the trade of medicine he also learned its art and science. He attended a course of anatomy taught by Dr William Shippen Jr, a recent Edinburgh graduate, and read the classic texts of medicine which included Boerhaave's lectures on physiology and pathology and Van Swieten's commentaries on Boerhaave's practical aphorisms.[13] During his five-and-a-half-years, apprenticeship with Redman, he was encouraged by Dr Shippen and another recent graduate of Edinburgh, Dr John Morgan, to pursue a degree in medicine at their *alma mater.* Morgan later wrote to Rush in Edinburgh and indicated that he might, on his return, be given the first Chair of Chemistry at the College of Philadelphia.[14]

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There is evidence from his correspondence that Rush was a somewhat emotional young man who, as he himself revealed, had not yet overcome 'an uncommon aversion to scenes of medical distress'. In a letter to his school-mate Enoch Green, he described his unease in a manner evocative of some modern environmentalists, lamenting that:

> This earthly frame, a minute fabric, a center of wonders, is forever subject to Diseases and Death. The very air we breath too often proves noxious, our food is armed with poison, the very elements conspire the ruin of our constitutions, and Death forever lies lurking to deceive us.[15]

This outburst was prompted by the distressing news of the premature death of Samuel Davies, Rush's third 'father and friend' who had been for him 'the bright source of advice and consolation'.[16]

Edinburgh (1766–1768)

Rush's medical education was similar to that previously outlined for Thomas Percival. Like the latter, he arrived in Edinburgh laden with impressive recommendations and letters of introduction from his Scottish-trained teachers. Rush even had the foresight to enlist the aid of Philadelphia's agent in London, Benjamin Franklin, whose generous patronage assured him entry into the most sought-after intellectual and social circles of the Scottish capital.

In his first year in Edinburgh, Rush diligently followed the plan of lectures mapped out for him by his former teacher and friend, Dr Morgan.[17] He obtained, as directed, tickets of admission to the lectures of the doctors Monro Secondus, Black, Russell and Cullen. To his friends in America he boasted that the University was in 'the zenith of its glory' and suggested that Edinburgh was in the throes of a revival in medicine analogous to the one in religion proclaimed from the pulpits of his New Light teachers. The present era, he wrote,

> will be famous for a revolution in physic. The old doctrines of the blood, nerves, &c, are now exploded, and much more rational ones substituted in their place.[18]

William Cullen was the undisputed leader of this medical 'revolution', and for Rush, as for generations of Edinburgh students, he embodied the character of the new medical scientist. He was, Rush wrote in his eulogy for Cullen, 'to medicine what Newton had been to astronomy and Franklin to electricity'.[19] Like Percival and

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his Dissenting colleagues, Rush viewed Cullen's theories of medicine and his method of teaching in the light of Bacon's programme of reform. Although it is often Cullen's Newtonian roots which are emphasized by his scholars,[20] Rush's assessment of his teacher is compelling evidence of the ubiquity of Bacon's ideas among the Edinburgh medical professoriate. While many of the latter were equally influenced by both Newton and Bacon, it was the ideals of the latter which were used to legitimate the reform programmes espoused by the Scottish universities.[21] As one scholar of the Scottish Enlightenment aptly remarked, 'Newton may have furnished the letter, but it was Bacon who provided the spirit of the laws of induction'.[22] Rush's eulogy of his favourite teacher is thus an interesting example of the influence of Baconian ideas, not only as a vehicle of reform but as a pedagogical device, assimilated by generations of medical students.[23]

Rush saw Cullen as a practical and enlightened Scot who taught his students that truth and utility were the chief goals of any scientific enterprise. Those who wished, as Rush did, to discover in a chemical analysis the intricate workings of the providential mind, were free to do so. With Cullen, however, a student's search for cosmic order was an extra-curricular activity. According to Rush, Cullen, though disappointingly lukewarm toward religion, was an inspiring teacher, a ground-breaker and path-clearer who 'swept away the rubbish of the past' in order that his students might begin their exploration unencumbered. He had, Rush wrote, stripped *Materia Medica* of its errors, and chemistry of its jargon, mysterious language and vain alchemical pursuits. While his imagination was 'a hot-bed of hypotheses which led him to constant observation and experiment', it was tempered by the integrity and candour essential to all great minds. Like Gregory, Cullen warned of the perils of credulity and 'the undue influence which antiquity and great names are apt to have upon the human mind'.[24] For him, the exercise of professional authority did not conflict with the spirit of free inquiry or the flow of ideas. He emphasized the necessity of co-operation and encouraged the free movement of ideas between individuals, groups and countries. He wrote few books but, as Rush noted with admiration:

> the fruits of his inquiries are to be found in most of the medical publications that have appeared in Great-Britain within the last thirty years. Many of the Theses, published in Edinburgh during his life, were the vehicles of his opinions or practice in medicine: and few of them contained an important or useful discovery, which

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